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ABSTRACT

This report describes the efforts of Mount St. Mary's College (California) to extend the benefits of a strong, traditional baccalaureate program to an underserved population of women in an urban region, including substantial numbers of minority and first-generation college students. To help realize its service mission and increase access to students from the college's inner-city community, the college opened its Doheny Campus in South Central Los Angeles in 1962. As increasing numbers of women from inner-city schools began arriving underprepared for college-level work, the college established the Alternative Access program in 1984 to help Doheny students achieve high educational standards and persist to graduation. The hallmarks of the college's other educational innovations--multicultural multicultural education, service learning, leadership, and assessment--have their foundations in the college's "whole student" approach. Further, the college's programs are not limited to learning support; through applied service learning activities and co-curricular experiences, students are not only given an opportunity to relate theory with practice but also to make contributions to their own communities. The most tangible reason for student success, however, is the faculty's commitment to their students--to teaching, learning, and continual inquiry and improvement. Mount St. Mary's College stresses, up front, the roles of teachers and mentor to current and prospective faculty. Institutional statistics and a list of milestones on the school's path to reform are included. (MAB)

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PERSPECTIVES
June 1998

Exemplars

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Mount St. Mary's College

The Problem: *Extend the benefits of a strong traditional baccalaureate program to an underserved population of women in an urban region, including substantial numbers of minority and first-generation college students.*

The Solution: *Create an associate's-level Alternative Access program and incorporate multicultural perspectives into a baccalaureate curriculum, combining academic rigor with the support systems that help young women to persist and succeed.*

"Demography is not destiny," says Sister Karen Kennelly, president of Mount St. Mary's College, referring to her institution's deliberate efforts to promote the success of a student body of women who are predominantly minority and first-generation college students. Ironically, it was a multicultural perspective—linked to the faculty and administration's strong sense of service and the College's student-centered mission—that became the organizing principle for a new direction at this Catholic liberal arts college.

The Mount's educational goals stem from the commitment of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Carondelet to identify and address unmet societal needs. On the College's original site, the Chalon campus in the hills overlooking Los Angeles, this commitment is manifested in the development of a student focus and a strong undergraduate program that educated first generation college students—over its 70-year history, primarily the daughters of European immigrants who had settled in the Los Angeles area. As times changed, the Mount realized that its student population did not represent the cultures that were collectively becoming a majority in the surrounding region. To help realize its service mission and increase access to students

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from the College's inner-city community, the Mount opened the Doheny Campus in South Central L.A. in 1962.

"We came to see diversity in our student body as a learning opportunity, not a disadvantage," says professor of education Sister Kieran Vaughan, who led the Mount's first major curriculum revision to infuse multicultural perspectives into the College's programs. "We have learned from our students in our efforts to better serve them and to continually improve the education that we provide." A strong service mission provides an extraordinary degree of accord within the College community about its central values and goals. "There is no cultural demarcation among administrators, faculty, or students at the Mount" says Cheryl Mabey, director of the Women's Leadership Program and a faculty member at the College for 20 years. "The common commitment to service has created a learning community with an institutionalized awareness that it can always do things better." It is this sense of communication, commitment, and collaboration—values that apply to all of the institution's administration, faculty, and students—that has made change a reality.

As increasing numbers of women from inner-city schools began arriving underprepared for college-level work, the Mount established the Alternative Access program in 1984 to help Doheny students achieve high educational standards and persist to graduation. Half of the women to matriculate in this program are the first to attend college from families living at or below poverty level; while the Mount upholds the expectation of academic rigor from its students, it is also committed to providing the support needed to succeed. This approach has produced astounding results: 67 percent of Doheny's students graduate, compared to a 10 percent graduation rate among California's community colleges. Fifty percent of these students transfer to the Chalon campus to pursue baccalaureate degrees, while an additional 30 percent enroll in BA programs elsewhere.

How does the program achieve such exemplary graduation and persistence rates while maintaining high expectations for students' academic performance? Sister Kathleen Kelly, vice president of academic affairs at the Doheny campus, explains: "Fundamentally, we accept each underprepared student with her individual strengths and weaknesses and provide unique ways to help her develop the skills essential to college-level performance." Central to student success are Doheny's comprehensive, integrated academic and social support systems that extend from pre-orientation, to summer programs, to graduation. "Students are continuously evaluated by their per-

formance on competency-based tests and take for-credit classes in basic math, reading, and writing skills while they also pursue college-level courses," says Sister Kathleen. "We provide a Learning Resource Center, where students take learning 'prescriptions' from teachers to focus on particular skills directly tied to classes and also drop in for tutoring and skills assessment. We also have early-warning notices written by teachers to student advisors that help us to identify and solve problems. For example, one student repeatedly fell asleep in class. We discovered it was because she was working at night, so we helped her find another, more convenient job."

Along with other priorities for change, the Alternative Access program emerged from a five-year strategic planning process that is sufficiently structured to relate scores of individual initiatives to institutional goals and flexible enough to harvest faculty creativity and student perspectives. "We maintain coherence by engaging members of the entire College community on both campuses in goal-setting," says President Kennelly, "and each academic department develops annual objectives in accord with larger institutional goals. Budget priority is given to those programs and projects most closely associated with the achievement of those broader goals."

The flexibility is provided by ad hoc task forces, composed of faculty and administrators, that facilitate the development and implementation of curricular and co-curricular projects. These task forces also work with standing committees to ensure broad faculty participation in decision-making. Reflecting on her institution's capacity for nimbleness, Cheryl Mabey observes: "Change looks much less threatening when it is motivated by the goal of improvement—making teaching and learning more effective—and at Mount St. Mary's it is also motivated by a recognition that we need to change as professionals as well."

The hallmarks of the Mount's educational innovations—multicultural education, service learning, leadership, and assessment—have their foundations in the "whole student" approach. The Mount's efforts to define multicultural education began as an all-College examination of the relationship between culture and learning, with the aim of redesigning pedagogy and curricula to meet more effectively the needs of its diverse student body. Central to curricular revision were incentives for faculty through mini-grants to explore how to infuse diverse cultural perspectives into key liberal studies areas. The Mount had pursued a grant to address the needs of a diverse student population within its teacher-preparation majors. Sister Kieran explains, "In California, these majors involve a range of disciplines, so the

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College was able to use what we had learned in Liberal Studies to apply multicultural perspectives across the curriculum."

"Infusion" of multicultural perspectives meant more than the simple addition of materials; it meant linking cultures and learning styles, as well as helping students to explore issues, problems, and themes from two or more cultural viewpoints. The resulting curriculum and pedagogical approaches were comprehensive enough to serve as models for other campuses and the teaching profession in general; in keeping with its service mission—to its students and community—the Mount has worked with private and federal foundations to extend its work beyond the two campuses. In fact, it has produced a series of monographs and two video programs, narrated by Maya Angelou, which present Mount St. Mary's approach to multicultural education for schools as well as businesses.

Underlying the curricular and pedagogical reforms, as well as the dedication to continued access, are dozens of student support programs and services to assist students in meeting high expectations. "There is a program here for every need," says senior Shannay Howard-Sampson, who began her career at the Mount in the Weekend College and returned as a full-time adult student on the Chalon campus. "The African American Alumni Association and the Organization for Returning Adults both helped me to keep my head above water when I first arrived. Even before I started school, these programs helped me to identify my goals and my ideals. I had been out of the classroom for five years, so other support systems helped me to brush up on my study strategies and basic skills."

The programs are not limited to learning support; through applied service learning activities and co-curricular experiences, students are given an opportunity not only to relate theory with practice but also to make contributions in their own communities. Shannay is now an ambassador manager for the Student Ambassadors Program, which prepares Mount St. Mary's women to help students in L.A.'s inner-city high schools understand the differences that college can make. Many Mount students are able to return to the high schools from which they graduated to act as counselors, mentors, and role models. "When I was in high school," says Shannay, "something like the Ambassadors Program would have made a real difference for me: to have one person with whom I could make an appointment, at any time, and sit down one-on-one to discuss how she's dealt with the issues I would be facing—from financial aid to family issues. For some students, this program makes or breaks their decision to go to college."

In many of these co-curricular projects, students actually design a service learning program that often lasts beyond their initial participation. For her service learning project as a college urban fellow, senior biology major Maria Ocampa was assigned to McLaine Middle School, where she performed a needs assessment to determine students' primary area of concern: violence in the classroom. "We decided to design a peer mediation program to help the students resolve conflicts. Instead of providing direct services, we helped the school to provide the services itself and to maintain the program after we left," Maria explains, mentioning that she only developed a definition of service learning after completing the project. "For the student, it's about using your analytical skills to identify and understand the problem, because you're pushed by real circumstances to make decisions and find solutions. For the organizations we serve, it isn't just teaching someone how to fish, but teaching them about the ocean and the environment and their role in fishing—it is a holistic approach."

Most of these programs also offer students leadership experiences—indeed, both campuses function in many ways as leadership laboratories. Previously an unspoken goal, efforts to promote women's leadership were codified into courses and mentored experiences beginning in the 1970s; a decade later, the Leadership Studies Program was acknowledged as one of the top three in the nation. Through curricular and co-curricular strategies, all students are exposed to leadership concepts; others engage it as a discipline through Leadership Study minors.

In the spirit of continuous improvement, Mount St. Mary's uses assessment to align planning, academic and student support services, and budgeting. Developed incrementally over two decades and linked to strategic goals, the College has implemented an assessment program that includes freshman/senior testing in basic skills, critical thinking, and multicultural understanding; a sophomore/senior survey to obtain data on the "value added" that its education provides; a student outcomes and non-academic program review administered by Student Services; and an annual alumnae survey of graduates two, five, and ten years out.

The most tangible reason for student success, however, is the faculty's commitment to their students—to teaching, learning, and continual inquiry and improvement. In fact, the Mount stresses, up front, the roles of teacher and mentor to current and prospective faculty in its hiring and promotion practices, and the faculty handbook lists teaching competence as the first and most important criterion for promotion and tenure. Beyond

teacher and mentor, faculty have a third primary role—that of "learner." Dr. Mabey explains: "We now ask ourselves, 'How has our experience in educating a broader student population changed a narrow perspective on our own professional roles?'" Professional development is central to promoting the vitality of the faculty and to achieving broader institutional goals; regular sabbaticals and faculty development endowments—most related to the current topics of reform on campus—are offered, and faculty gather at Friday Forums to present and discuss new program and curriculum ideas.

Challenged financially by its commitment to access, the Mount has employed creative and traditional means to raise revenue to fund reforms and to provide the financial assistance that students require. Every major curriculum initiative and almost every student support program is funded by private-sector, foundation, or federal dollars. This reliance on grant dollars has contributed to what Dr. Mabey calls an "entrepreneurial spirit" on Mount St. Mary's campus that extends from the administration to the faculty to students.

The more traditional method of fund-raising has been through a capital campaign to raise a goal of $40 million to fund physical plant projects, library improvements, and investments in technology. In fact, a focus on technology is the Mount's next major initiative—building infrastructure as well as investigating how technology can improve teaching and learning. After helping students to develop the skill sets needed to achieve academic excellence and the leadership qualities that promote civic awareness, the Mount is now focusing on providing a new set of tools: the technological savvy that will prepare them for the world of the 21st century.

Institutional Statistics:

Private, Catholic, liberal arts college in Los Angeles, California, with two campuses: Doheny, in South Central L.A., and Chalon, in Brentwood

1,644 undergraduate and **340** graduate students
Ethnic composition: **45%** Hispanic, **10%** African American, **20%** Asian American/Pacific Islander, **25%** Anglo American
77 Full-time faculty, **120** part-time faculty

Milestones on the Path to Reform:

- In 1962, the College acquired the Doheny campus in the heart of South Central Los Angeles. Students and teachers seeking masters degrees or

credentials from Doheny challenged the College to reflect on questions of access and service to the local community.

- By 1966, the College had established an Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA) that provided invaluable support for institutional transformation through the collection and dissemination of data necessary for decision-making and outcomes assessment.

- The Women's Leadership program was initiated in 1975 at Doheny and soon extended to include baccalaureate students at Chalon.

- The first five-year planning process designed by the OIRA in 1979 affirmed a student-centered philosophy.

- The Alternative Access program was formalized in 1984 to broaden the Mount's commitment to access and support for women in the surrounding community.

- The 1986-91 five-year plan named the goal, "to become receptive to the richness of our cultural diversity," as a major priority; a comprehensive process of curriculum revision began with an invitation to faculty and staff to reflect on the link between culture and learning.

- The College recognized from the outset that access to college for many students was severely restricted by a lack of financial resources. Tremendous efforts to increase scholarships began to show results by the late 1980s with the building of endowment, creation of the Weingart Loan Fund, and the securing of grants such as MBRS (Minority Biomedical Research Support) and MARC (Minority Access to Research Careers).

- The Weekend College began at Chalon in 1992, affording adults the opportunity to earn baccalaureate degrees with majors in either liberal arts or business.

- Curriculum reform attained a milestone in 1990 with a faculty decision to infuse multicultural content into Liberal Studies, the major required for an elementary school teaching credential in California.

- Faculty took the next step in 1992 of revising general education requirements to include multicultural content, following the infusion model used for Liberal Studies. A comprehensive assessment plan, designed and administered by the OIRA, took shape concurrently with these changes.

- A creative new form of outreach to inner-city high schools was discovered in 1991 in the Student Ambassadors program. Currently, 40 ambassadors serve in 35 high schools, two housing projects, one middle school, and a transition home for homeless women and children. Plans are underway with the City of Los Angeles to expand into an additional eight housing projects.

- In 1993, the College began publishing monographs on teaching for cultural fluency, issues of access and persistence, and the role of faculty development in multicultural education. The College also began producing a two-part video series for academic and corporate leaders.

- In 1994 the Mount opened the Center for Cultural Fluency at Doheny as a resource for L.A.-area K-12 teachers, assisting them in meeting the needs of their diverse student body through professional development activities.

- Implementation of the 1996-2001 strategic plan began with the urban engagement and civic responsibility project, funded by the Hewlett Foundation. As part of this plan, the Mount is concentrating faculty and staff development on using technology to enhance the teaching and learning process for its multicultural student body.

Exemplars

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